

THE GARDEN STATE



A glorified chicken coop, this "egg factory" near Toms River contributed to annual Garden State harvest of 2,700,000,000 fresh eggs which, if laid end to end at the Equator, would encircle the earth five times.

POULTRY -- A KEY FARM 'INDUSTRY'

The Egg, Rather Than the Hen, Comes First in New Jersey Because Its Sales Account for 80 Per Cent of State's Annual \$170,000,000 Poultry Income

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

IN NEW JERSEY it's easy to answer, strictly from an economic viewpoint, the age-old question as to whether the chicken or the egg comes first. It's the egg, or, to be more precise, the two billion, 700 million fresh eggs harvested annually by Garden State poultrymen.

Those billions of eggs have sent New Jersey winging into a position of national prominence that is startlingly high. Monmouth County ranks third and Ocean County fourth among all egg-producing counties in the United States, and, to add further luster, Cumberland is eighth and Hunterdon ninth nationally.

The 18,000,000 or so chickens on New Jersey farms owe their existence to eggs, over and above the facts of poultry life, since 80 per cent of the state's annual \$170,000,000 poultry income stems from egg sales. Be fair

to the chicken, nevertheless; let it be emphasized that all this egg pre-eminence is due to the prolific White Leghorn—so numerous and so valuable in New Jersey that it's not amiss to muse that the Leghorn has more right to be considered the state bird than the goldfinch.

Income from poultry meat mounts up to \$35,000,000 annually in the state over and above egg sales and in this category chickens share honors with turkeys, geese, guinea hens and the like. The total would be far higher except for the fact that the White Leghorn is so wiry that when she ends her egg-laying days she is valuable only for the soup pot, chicken salad, stewing or chicken a-la-king. That despite the fact that in modern poultry practice she seldom lives more than a year.

NEW JERSEY'S poultry story is big and complicated. It spreads over every county, with even decidedly un-bucolic Hudson having a few chickens about the premises. Poultry accounts for 40 cents out of every dollar taken in by the state's agriculturists and at least 6,000 farmers have eggs as a major source of income. Thousands of others pick up a nice sideline nest egg from chickens kept along with

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Laying pullets at peak of production crowd feed troughs. These prolific White Leghorns were introduced from Italy around 1840.

This is the third in a series of articles on New Jersey's highly diversified agriculture, vigorous and growing despite the constant inroads of industrial and residential development. Next week: Vegetables (truck and market gardening).



Steps in mechanical motherhood. At left, traying eggs for incubators and (above) removing Leghorn chicks from trays on 21st day. BELOW: Pedigreed chicks from single hen and sire being wingbanded after hatching in separate wire baskets, enabling breeders to keep track of poultry families selected on basis of production records.

JERSEY POULTRY

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vegetables, dairy cows or field crops.

Two billion, 700 million eggs add up to a lot of breakfasts. One statistician with a worldly turn of mind estimates that if hens had laid those eggs end to end, the result would be a string of New Jersey eggs stretching five times around the earth at the Equator. Nearly three billion eggs can add up to a lot of budgetary indigestion, too, as the state's poultrymen have recently discovered.

The growth of the state's poultry industry in the last 20 years has been nothing short of phenomenal, and might well be described as a wild mushrooming far beyond the wildest fancies of 30 years ago. Such growth eventually had to bring immense problems—and the year 1954 saw poultrymen trapped in the economic fury of plummeting egg prices, high feed costs and staggering debts.

ONCE poultry was a nice, trouble-free agricultural adjunct, something which concerned the farmer's wife far more than the farmer. It was she who gathered the eggs, set the hens to hatch and shooed the roosters off the back porch and into the trees at the end of day. If she had any eggs left to exchange for a bolt of calico in the village store, that was her business.

Chickens held importance on New Jersey farms all the way back to Colonial times, but the hard-working hen of early days scratched her own way through life without benefit of expert advice. Whatever eggs old Biddy could produce from food scratched in the yard, fine. Whatever chicks she hatched, fine again; if the chicks grew up to be roosters they could be eaten soon, if they grew up to be hens they could lay eggs to a ripe old age and then be hacked apart for soup.

This pattern of doing what came naturally ended for mother hen between 1880 and 1900. Two factors—incubation and the demand in New

York for white-shelled eggs—changed the hen from a barnyard personality into an egg factory in miniature. Motherhood had to be pushed from the hen's mind; all anyone asked was that she lay eggs. A kerosene and tin mother took care of the hatching and brooding.

WHITE-SHELLED eggs flew the White Leghorn from relative obscurity to topmost prominence. Introduced to this country from Italy in about 1840, the Leghorn had virtually no farm popularity. Indeed, many at first despised this small, flighty bird as a veritable "sparrow." Worse, anyone who tried to eat a stringy old Leghorn hen after her egg days ended could think of no kinder name than "white crow."

Pushing both incubation and White Leghorns were determined groups of poultry fanciers and breeders, particularly a little group in the Essex-Union-Middlesex county area, who in 1877 formed the New Jersey Poultry Assn.—the nation's first poultry organization. They sought to encourage interest in breeding and to disseminate information on latest poultry practices.

The association's 1879 annual show in Newark created a sensation when hundreds of farmers stood around a revolutionary and unbelievable substitute setter called an incubator. As early as 1852 a Mr. Carman of Bordentown had hatched eggs with oil heat, and now as men watched chicks chirp their way into the world under the wing of a kerosene-heated artificial mother, they began to muse that perhaps this poultry industry might some day earn a man a dollar or two.

Some protested this birth without a natural mother; in Hunterdon and Bergen counties outspoken critics predicted that any chick born in an incubator couldn't help but smell and taste of kerosene all its life. Nevertheless, they listened with respect in 1879 to tales of the world's largest incubating



machine at Creskill in Bergen County—where 10,000 chicks per week were hatched without benefit of a single setting hen.

Hammonton poultrymen, well out in the sands and pines of western Atlantic County, first put incubation on a ledger-balancing basis. Their profits from incubating and raising as many as 20,000 broilers annually as early as 1885 moved the chicken grower into a position of agricultural importance. Twenty years later, however, Hammonton poultrymen had turned from broilers to eggs, an augury of things to come.

POULTRYMEN demanded and got recognition at an 1889 meeting of the New Jersey State Board of Agriculture, the overlord since 1872 of the state's farm interests. One board member said pointedly that nothing had been done to help poultrymen, declaring that the Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers had completely ignored chickens. "Why, you'd think farmers despised poultrymen," said the board member. Quickly the State Poultry Assn. gained membership on the board, although, to tell the truth, most farmers DID despise poultrymen in those days.

Out in Hunterdon County, meanwhile, a farmer named Joseph D.

Wilson of Stockton began experimenting with the new-fangled incubator. Neighbors quickly learned that Joe Wilson had pretty good chicks (without so much as a hint of kerosene odor on them). Word of the excellence of the Stockton chicks spread as far as Chicago, from where in 1892 Wilson received an order.

Wilson packed a few chicks and sent them to Chicago by Railway Express—the first long-distance shipment of day-old chicks in history. Soon Wilson turned to parcel post and the Stockton post office heard the cheep of thousands of chicks being sent to far points in shallow cardboard boxes pierced to let in air. Thus Joe Wilson of Stockton founded America's now-huge commercial hatching business.

OTHERS followed Wilson, of course. R. W. Kerr chose a site at Frenchtown, up-river from Stockton, and founded Kerr Chickerries in 1908. Way downstate, Elmer H. Wene, a poultry foreman at Rutgers Experiment Station in 1915 and then superintendent of the State Egglaying contest at Vineland until 1921, established his famed hatchery at Vineland in 1922.

Three years later Stern Bros. started a Vineland hatchery to com-

pete with Wene, and in 1937 Nello Melini, a Wene employe, broke away to organize still another major Vineland egg-hatching business. Today New Jersey has about 90 commercial hatcherymen who each year bring 40,000,000 downy chicks out of their shells. Kerr, Wene, Stern and Melini among them account for more than 50 per cent of the total, although the hatching business is widespread throughout Hunterdon, Cumberland and Ocean counties.

The rise of Hunterdon and Cumberland in the hatching industry occasioned no surprise, since by 1910 those two regions dominated the state's poultry industry. At first no county challenged Hunterdon's leadership in production of the white-shelled eggs so loved by New Yorkers, but in 1905 a dedicated band of Vineland chicken men began sound poultry practices which by 1924 vaulted their area into the top egg spot.

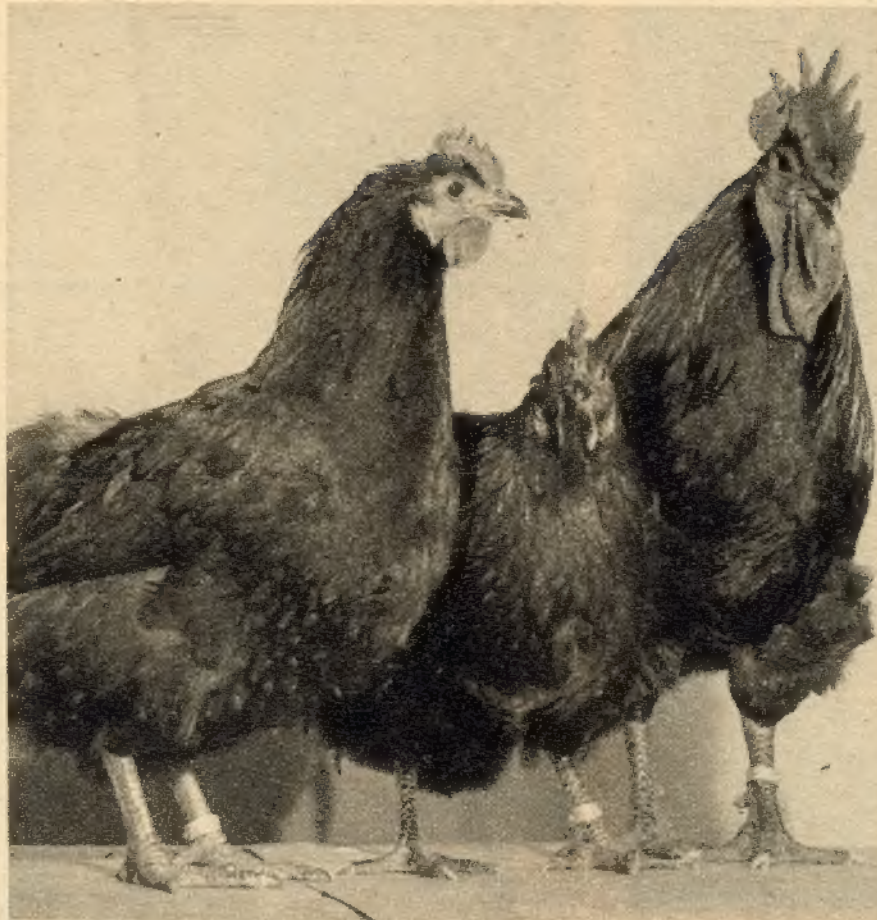
AS THE 20th Century chipped from the shell of the 19th, an interesting manifestation of buyer preference changed forever the direction of New Jersey egg production. At that time eggs from New England vied strenuously for the New York market, with New Jersey's Leghorn eggs being white-shelled and competing eggs (mostly from Plymouth Rocks) being brown-shelled. New Jersey eggs, because of proximity, usually were fresher—and New York housewives made up this easy-to-remember—and completely untrue—old wives' tale: White shell, fresh egg; brown shell, stale egg.

Census figures for 1900 showed almost 2,000,000 chickens in New Jersey, salving mightily to produce about 12,000,000 dozen (about 445,000,000) eggs annually. By today's standards that's scarcely a yolk in the omelet, but even then it had been clearly established that poultry could be a prime source of farm dollars. On many farms, the lady of the house still tended the hens, but her husband couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't too much for her (the work, that is, not to mention the income).

Up and up went Garden State egg production—to 13,600,000 dozen eggs in 1909, to 27,000,000 dozen in 1924, to 36,000,000 dozen in 1929. Cumberland County alone produced 6,300,000 eggs in 1929, and Vineland proudly assumed the name of "The Egg Basket of the East." Vineland's prominence was no accident; it had been the result of sound production and marketing practices.

FOR example, Vineland egg men pioneered in egg grading as early as 1908. An iron ring determined the two grades of the day—those which went through the ring and those which didn't. Fifteen years later, in 1923, Vineland's Quality Egg Club showed its tail feathers to all competitors by introducing the noted "Vineland Label." New Yorkers now felt that the familiar green and white Vineland egg box (and the graded white eggs inside) symbolized unsurpassed size and quality—and willingly paid high premiums for the package.

Vineland and Flemington, the twin capitals of eggdom until 1920,



Only native poultry breed is the Jersey Black Giant, once a popular meat type chicken. At right, trapnested pedigreed flock is released by attendant who keeps production record of each bird according to number visible on some wings.



suddenly knew competition—up from the sandy oceanside counties of Atlantic, Monmouth and Ocean came a rising egg tide. Those three counties combined for 6,000,000 dozen eggs in 1924, pushed their total to 10,000,000 dozen in 1934. The areas of poultry eminence had been clearly stenciled on New Jersey as the Great Depression deepened in 1932; ahead lay a growth that was to astound even the most knowledgeable chicken experts.

Every county in New Jersey had egg producers in 1934. Even Hudson produced 200,000 eggs that year (although in the 1930s Hudson gained greater notoriety from egg-throwing than from egg-laying). Nine counties over and above the big five (Cumberland, Hunterdon, Monmouth, Ocean and Atlantic) each produced 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 dozen eggs annually.

Poultry raising had gone about as far as it could go, some said. Why, they argued, many a man had 1,000 chickens, some even kept up to 2,000, although few had dared that far.

Besides, said the "we've-gone-about-as-far-as-we-can-go" school, chicken coops had become the last word—some of those big "apartment houses" coops going five stories tall. Lights blazed in hen houses through the night, spurring the noble Leghorns on to new records. Thousands of chickens thrived without ever touching ground. Careful breeding improved flocks, the poultry section established at Rutgers in 1910 waged war on such cripples as chicken pox and bacillary diarrhea. Feed became better, and the ever-grateful hens boosted their output again and again.

ON TOP of all this, the farmers had helped themselves by developing in New Jersey a new way of marketing their eggs. New York's "Black Friday" of 1929 had swept over the back country, too, and by 1930 egg prices

had sagged distressingly. The spread between farmer sale price and consumer buying price widened—even as consumer prices dropped.

Something had to be done, and a small group of persevering Hunterdon County agricultural leaders led the way in 1930 when they founded the Flemington Auction Market, the first successful cooperative ever to sell eggs and live poultry at auction. An earlier attempt in Monmouth County had failed because of farmer apathy. That apathy—plus downright scorn—drifted up to Flemington when sales started in August 1930.

ONLY 80 cases of eggs went on sale that first broiling hot day, and more people came to jeer than to cheer. The auction netted slightly more than \$900, excellent for the times, and it didn't require calculus for a poultryman to figure that the auction could make him money.

Flemington Auction Market eggs became "FAMous" (a proud trademark of today) and the cooperative moved into new quarters within a year. The good word rapidly spread to Vineland, where on June 4, 1931, the Egg Auction Cooperative of South Jersey (now Vineland Egg Auction) sold its first 161 cases. Apathy and Ridicule, the team of jesters at the opening in Flemington, showed up at Vineland, of course, and had something to snicker about—the 161 cases lost \$70 on New York prices.

Within one month, however, the Vineland auction needed larger quarters and by 1936 it was paying dividends. Now, after 23 years, Vineland Egg Auction claims to be the largest cooperative of its kind in the United States, with sales topping \$9,500,000 last year. It has grossed upward of \$70,000,000 on Vineland eggs since 1931.

Four other egg auctions have followed the trail blazed in Flemington

and Vineland—at Hightstown, Mount Holly, Paterson and Hackettstown. Vineland's sales total is first, followed by Flemington's \$7,300,000 gross. The six state auctions last year combined for sales of 40,000,000 dozen eggs (about 20 per cent of the New Jersey output)—plus another 5,800,000 pounds of poultry.

Auctions provided a stimulus, then improving times before World War II provided even greater demands for eggs. Those eggs came—hens upped their production from 36,000,000 dozen in 1934 to 46,000,000 dozen in 1939. This sudden jump could be attributed mainly to a new type of poultryman who started coming to Monmouth and Ocean counties in the late 1930s.

These newcomers had been small businessmen in New York City or business or professional men who had fled Europe's bloody purges. They knew nothing about poultry, but shrewdly reasoned that if 1,000 chickens could make a man a living, then 3,000 chickens should make him three times as good a living. So, contrary to all poultry science of 20 years ago, they began putting 3,000 or more hens under one roof.

INSTEAD of failing as most old-line poultrymen expected, the newcomers prospered splendidly. World War II accelerated demands for eggs, and after the war more and more refugees poured into Monmouth, Ocean, Atlantic and Cumberland counties to become poultrymen. For one five-year period Ocean County gained three new poultry farmers each week—most of them so newly arrived in this country that at one time speeches by Rutgers poultry specialists had to be translated into foreign tongues.

Unquestionably the intense industrialization of the poultry industry, now common throughout the

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